

Millions of Venezuelans are fleeing to the south—through South America’s ‘poetic heart’

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After arriving to La Paz and spending a week indoors at a temporary shelter to escape the attention of immigration authorities, the González family takes an afternoon stroll past the Cáritas building in downtown La Paz, on August 29, 2021. Cáritas is tied to the Catho...

Millions fleeing south

Located atop the world's largest oil reserves, Venezuela was one of South America's most prosperous countries until plunging oil prices, poor governance, corruption, political turmoil, and crippling U.S. sanctions hollowed it into a decayed petrostate. Hyperinflation and economic collapse led to severe shortages of food, medicine, and electricity. Some 96 percent of Venezuelans now live in poverty.

Venezuela has one of the worst crime rates in the world, as well as the highest rate of violent deaths per capita in Latin America. In 2020, almost 12,000 people met violent ends, according to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, a figure that is seven and a half times the global average.



A backpack bearing the colors of the Venezuelan flag sits on a bench at the Ombudsman Office (Defensoría del Pueblo) located at the Bolivia side of the Desaguadero border on August 9, 2021. Thousands of these backpacks can be seen throughout Latin America, serving...

Since 2014, at least 5.6 million Venezuelans—more than 18 percent of the population—have fled the hunger, crime, violence, and collapse of public services that have destroyed their homeland. It’s an exodus that the Organization of American States has called “the largest exile crisis in the history of the region.” Globally, it is second only to Syria, where a decade-long conflict has propelled 6.7 million people out of their war-torn state. Yet according to the OAS, Venezuela’s migration crisis may exceed Syria’s once pandemic travel restrictions ease and borders reopen.

Most of the millions of Venezuelans on the move have headed south, not north. Bolivia—a landlocked state wedged between Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile and Peru—is primarily a transit zone for those heading deeper south into Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, but it’s also becoming a destination country. Whether this trend will become a sustained pattern or merely a blip caused by pandemic-related border closures remains to be seen.

The International Organization of Migration notes that some Venezuelans are returning to Bolivia from Peru and Chile because of rising xenophobia and discrimination, as well as better access to healthcare and a lower cost of living. Bolivia currently hosts about 10,000 Venezuelan refugees and migrants, a figure that has doubled in the past year. Peru, by

contrast, is now home to 1.1 million Venezuelans, while Chile hosts about 480,000. Such large communities can be targeted as scapegoats, whereas Bolivia's small Venezuelan population more easily melts into a country of 11.8 million people.



Venezuelan migrants Jonathan Pérez and his girlfriend, Esther Duran, arrive in El Alto, adjacent to La Paz, after crossing the border at Desaguadero the morning of July 30, 2021 and then taking a minibus to the capital. After one night, they continued on the following m...

Denise Montilla and her husband Nelson Salas (above left), along with her brother Darwin Montilla and his wife, Raymar Mendoza, dance merengue while their children play at Budare, a Venezuelan restaurant in La Paz, on June 20, 2021. They are among a small but grow...

Most Venezuelans who stay in Bolivia live in Santa Cruz, where the warm, humid weather feels more like their former home than the cold climate of the Andes. Carolina del Valle, a 39-year-old petroleum engineer and mother of two, arrived in Santa Cruz in 2018 with her mother and children. There was no single incident that pushed her and her husband out of Venezuela, she says, but each day was worse than the one before. The family's two-earner income barely covered food.

"The quality of life deteriorated," she says, "the healthcare, the insecurity." Like many Venezuelans now in Bolivia, her husband came before his family to help smooth their transition. Trained as a geologist, he now drives a taxi. She found administrative work in a textile factory and started a side business with her mother making and selling empanadas.

As professionals with some means, del Valle and her family were able to fly into Bolivia. But millions of so-called “walkers,” like Acero and Navarro, take one of two main southern land routes. There’s the arduous Andean corridor that the young family took, from Venezuela through Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and into Chile, and the less-traveled Amazonian route, from Venezuela through the jungles and forests of Brazil across the Mamoré River into the northeastern Bolivian city of Guayanamerín. Both routes are harrowing journeys across thousands of rugged miles. The ordeal proves deadly for some and devastating for many.

“Thank God we didn’t arrive as badly as some families,” del Valle says. “We didn’t arrive with empty hands, but there are some people who get here in very bad condition, in precarious conditions ... it’s very difficult.”



Venezuelan migrant Elizabeth Dugarte Hernández hands a bowl of Communion wafers to the Reverend Ildo Griz during Sunday Mass on World Refugee Day on June 20, 2021 at a Casa del Migrante, a shelter on the outskirts of La Paz. Griz is director of the Scalabrini Intern...

A generous response

Venezuelans aren’t the only refugees fleeing to the south rather than the north. The flow of people globally is predominantly southward, and countries in the global south now host 86 percent of the world’s displaced people.

In Santa Cruz, no one neighborhood has become a “little Caracas” with a concentration of Venezuelans. Instead, a key communal space is online, in social media groups run by more established members of the local Venezuelan diaspora—people who have banded together to help “make the load a little less heavy” for vulnerable recent arrivals, as del Valle puts it. The IOM says the Bolivian government offers no financial assistance, so help comes mainly from humanitarian organizations and other Venezuelans.

Del Valle’s WhatsApp group of about 15 volunteers is one of several that use social media, including Facebook and Telegram, to create what she calls “a chain of aid,” providing newcomers with food, clothes, footwear, shelter, and information. The efforts are self-financed, with people contributing what they can. “Since we are in the food business, we offer them food and some meals,” del Valle says, adding that the social media networks quickly spread the news when newcomers arrive and need help.

And they continue to arrive. Although the pandemic has closed borders, it hasn’t stopped Venezuelans from taking even riskier routes across Latin America and the Caribbean, further increasing their vulnerability to traffickers, smugglers, and armed gangs. Several countries, including Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, have also militarized their frontiers in an effort to curb migration. It’s estimated that between 500 to 900 Venezuelans a day continue to flee a country that once generously hosted refugees. Before the pandemic closed borders, the daily figure was 5,000.



The González family prepares to leave the Casa del Migrante shelter where they stayed for a week to move to a hotel in downtown La Paz on August 28, 2021. Meanwhile Hector Teran, third from left, stays behind to prepare for the next leg of his journey to Chile. The initial...

‘Protection network’

The Reverend Ildo Griz, director of the Scalabrini International Migration Network’s mission in Bolivia, sees many families impatient to leave Bolivia for what they consider lands of greater opportunity. He tries to encourage them to stay and end their exhausting, perilous journeys.

The 57-year-old Griz is part of a Christian organization that has shelters—known as *Casas del Migrante*, or migrant homes—throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. There are eight in Bolivia. “We have managed to form a protection network,” Griz says, “what we call solidarity and safe corridors where [refugees and migrants] are assisted from their country of origin practically to their destination country.”

That assistance includes food, shelter, and information about the safest bus routes, the cost of fares, and areas to avoid. “We never promote irregular migration,” the priest says, “but we know that migration exists already, and we are located at the borders to provide help.” It’s a benevolent network to counter the malevolent ones preying on Venezuelans and others moving through Latin America and the Caribbean.

In addition to providing meals and a bed, the organization also offers entrepreneurial courses in trades, such as hairdressing and carpentry, as well as workshops, including digital marketing and financial planning. “We help them make their life plan,” Griz says. People find him through word of mouth or referrals from police or state institutions.



The Huayna Potosí snow-capped mountains rise above the neighborhood of La Ceja in El Alto, Bolivia on July 30, 2021. The climate of the Altiplano is a drastic change from the Caribbean climate of Venezuela, one that few migrants are prepared for when they arrive.

For Venezuelans who opt to stay in Bolivia, the mission provides several months’ rent, basic home furnishings, supplies for a small business endeavor, and information about access to education, healthcare, and other state-provided services, as well as legal assistance. Cultural events such as soccer tournaments between Bolivians and Venezuelans also help integrate refugees and migrants into their new communities.

Mabel Coba took advantage of Scalabrini’s generous assistance to establish a thriving baking business in the small town of Batallas, high in the Altiplano region. The 46-year-old mother of three was an accountant in Venezuela. After a series of odd jobs in the Bolivian capital, La Paz, she heard about Griz’s foundation through a friend. She completed a digital marketing course and one in financial planning. Coba moved to Batallas from La Paz where the small-town hospitality and cheaper rents helped her assimilate and quickly become part of the community. “People know me because of my cakes,” she says.

She sells her baked goods every Saturday at a market stall and also takes orders via her Facebook page. “The foundation gave me the oven, the refrigerator, this table, the mixer, utensils,” she says, sitting in her small kitchen. It also helped arrange treatment for one of her daughters who has a hormonal growth problem and the other who has a learning disability. She’s happy with her decision to settle in Bolivia, although she says she would return to Venezuela if conditions improve.

Still, most of the Venezuelans that Griz helps don’t want to stay in Bolivia. “Of a group of 183 that we had last month,” he said, referring to July, “only five stayed.” He says the difficulty and cost of obtaining paperwork to legally remain in the country is a key limiting factor. Until recently, migrants and refugees who entered Bolivia irregularly faced fines of around 28 *Bolivianos* (\$4) for every day they were illegally in the country. In September, the Bolivian government approved an amnesty to encourage Venezuelans and others to legalize their status, a move the interior minister said would help thousands of people.



Stefany Azuaje Aguilera walks ahead of her family after leaving a migrant shelter on August 28, 2021. The crossing into Chile from the border town of Pisiga, more than 450 kilometers away, can be deadly. This year alone at least a dozen people have died making the crossing. I...

Refugees or migrants?

The legal difficulties in Bolivia are also rooted in definitions: Are displaced Venezuelans refugees or economic migrants? The difference can determine whether a person gets permission to stay or is deported. Refugees are internationally protected as persecuted people and cannot be sent back to their country of origin, whereas migrants can.

In Bolivia, the definition seems to depend somewhat on domestic politics and who's in power at a given time. In any case, the number is tiny. From 1983 to mid-2021, only 1,165 people of various nationalities were granted refugee status, with Peruvians accounting for almost half of that figure, according to CONARE, Bolivia's National Refugee Commission—*La Comisión Nacional del Refugiado*. All but one of the 243 Venezuelans on the list were recognized as refugees in 2020, under the previous right-wing government of Jeanine Añez, which was hostile to both its domestic socialist political opponents who are currently in power, as well as their co-ideologues ruling Venezuela. In 2019, under Bolivia's socialists, none of the 833 Venezuelans who applied for refugee status received it.

Claudia Barrionuevo, the director of CONARE, says that 108 of those 242 Venezuelans recognized as refugees never returned to receive the paperwork attesting to their new status. She suspects many Venezuelans file the free refugee application just so they can stay in the country legally and avoid the daily fines before moving elsewhere. "These people are economic migrants," she says, adding that recognizing them as refugees "delegitimizes the institution of the refugee."

Her view isn't shared by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees or the OAS, which say Venezuelans should be considered refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. "They are not migrants," UNHCR's Murillo says. "Regardless of ideological positions or how close one government is to the other, the question is whether we are talking about people who fulfill the refugee criteria, and in UNHCR's opinion, [Venezuelans] do."



Juhnnycer Magallanes prepares beef rib soup, a traditional Venezuelan dish, on August 15, 2021 in her kitchen at a home she shares with several other Venezuelan families. Magallanes, who makes a living by selling food in the streets of La Paz, is one of the few Venezuelans...

Juhnnycer Magallanes, a 30-year-old radiology technician, is one of the few Venezuelans to receive refugee status in Bolivia. “We were lucky,” she says. “When there was the change of government, they closed the doors.”

The mother of three arrived in February 2020 after spending seven months in Peru. The family of five didn’t have enough money to travel together, so they left Venezuela in waves: first the husband, Dalier Aviléz, who was being extorted by criminal gangs, then Magallanes and her two toddlers under three, after the gangs threatened to kidnap the babies for ransom. Magallanes’ 11-year-old daughter, Dalianny, was the last to leave Venezuela. She traveled with an uncle to join her family in Bolivia in August 2021.

Magallanes left home before the pandemic, in June 2019, when borders were still open. A guide mapped out the journey with a detailed itinerary of bus routes, hotels, and border crossings. As is common, the guide didn’t accompany her and her children. She traveled the Andean corridor legally and entered Peru as a tourist. The seven-day trip, including the guide’s fees, cost \$130. Her daughter Dalianny’s journey to Bolivia was much harder and included sections on foot through irregular mountain trails. The cost was \$600.



The González family rides the cable car in La Paz, Bolivia on August 29, 2021 during their first outing after having stayed for a week in a temporary shelter. Here, they take in the city where they plan to settle after receiving assistance from organizations in La Paz that help migrants.

The family left Peru after Avilés, the husband, was exploited by his employers at a car dealership who took advantage of his undocumented status to withhold his pay. Magallanes' tourist visa was also about to expire, and she feared staying in the country illegally and risking deportation. So the family crossed into Bolivia, where they've been living in a musty room in a decrepit shared house in central La Paz, above a store selling construction materials. It has been a difficult adjustment, particularly to La Paz's cold weather and high altitude.

"We want to do our best to stay here," Magallanes says, but probably not in La Paz. Santa Cruz, she heard, might be a better option. "It has the same climate that we have in Venezuela."

Marcelo Pérez del Carpio was born in Bolivia in 1982, and spent his early years in Venezuela before moving back to Bolivia in 2000, to study architecture. He has been recognized by the Ian Parry Scholarship, AI-AP, PhotoEspaña and was a member of The Eddie Adams Workshop. Follow him on Instagram [@marcelopezdelcarpio](https://www.instagram.com/marcelopezdelcarpio).

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